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Staff photo by Mark Bailey

Rosalind McKnight uses special cards for ESP testing during CVCC class
Predicting which card will be shown could demonstrate paranormal power

Parapsychology professor isn't surprised anymore

By Darrell Laurant
Staff writer

For Barbara Partridge, Rosalind McKnight's introduction to parapsychology class at Central Virginia Community College is "almost like church. When I leave, I take a warm feeling with me."

For Linda Scoville, it's "a window into another world. I can be around people who feel the same way I do."

And for yet another class member, it's a doorway into Alpha State.

"We had one lady this semester who would always slip in a few minutes late, put her head down on her desk and nap," said McKnight. "I understood. She had a tough work day, and she was worn out. But I'd always tell our speakers — 'Don't worry, she can pick up as much while she's asleep as most people do when they're awake.' "

Don't get the idea, however, that McKnight runs some sort of free-form Wednesday night zoo. She lectures. She teaches. She assigns papers, and even grades them. Her course is a regular — and important — entry on the CVCC curriculum printout.

But there are elements here that obviously transcend the normal college course. The first question addressed to McKnight on a recent evening, for instance.

"Last week," a woman said from the back of the room, "my son saw two figures standing on either side of the guest speaker — a man and a woman. He's always been a skeptic, but he saw them very distinctly. Could this be possible?"

McKnight turned to the rest of the class.

"Did anyone else see these figures?" she asked.

No one had.

"Interesting," McKnight said. "Your son may be very clairvoyent."

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Actually, nothing surprises her any more. Over the past 10 years, CVCC's parapsychology students have bent spoons, visited haunted houses and attempted long-distance thought transfer. And Rosie McKnight presides over it all like a benevolent Phil Donahue (complete with handsome head of white hair), setting out a "paranormal" salad bar for her students and letting them make their own judgments.

"I tell them to think for themselves," said McKnight, who holds a masters in divinity from New York's Union Theological Seminary. "Don't just believe what somebody tells you. It's good to be skeptical."

McKnight considers herself a "facilitator," augmenting her lectures with frequent guest speakers. For that reason, some of her students have taken the class as many as five times.

"It's always different," said one. "There are so many aspects to the subject."

This past semester, McKnight's 37 students included two teachers, three retirees, an engineer, an Amtrak employee, a realtor, two housewives and a couple of astrologers. Subjects covered ranged from ESP, hypnosis, "personal energy," astral projection, UFOs and dowsing.

"I've had psychic experiences myself," McKnight said, "but I'm not an unusual person. I think everybody has ESP — that's one of the things I'm trying to get across."

One of eight children, McKnight grew up in Dayton, Ohio. Her religious background wasn't exactly traditional (Church of the Brethren), but it wasn't until she had graduated from Union, married David McKnight and was teaching Sunday school at New York's Riverside Church that she began to explore what she calls "our other side."

"I just happened to pick up a book on Edgar Cayce and reincarnation," she said, "and got hooked on it. I even went down to Virginia Beach (Cayce's home base) to learn more about him. Later, we joined a group that was meeting at Riverside to explore alternative philosophies."

In the early 1970s, David McKnight accepted a teaching job at Blue Ridge Area Community College in Weyer's Cave.

"He taught english and philosophy," Rosie McKnight said, "and started a course in ESP as part of the philosophy program. We didn't know what to expect, but it went over very well."

So well that officials at CVCC contacted Mrs. McKnight about teaching the same class here.

"For several years, I commuted to Lynchburg from Waynesboro," she recalled. "Then David and I split up, and I came here for good four years ago."

McKnight has also worked at the Monroe Institute in Nelson County and staged several seminars, notably a 1977 Creative Living Institute session in Arlington that brought in speakers like Ruth Carter Stapleton and Raymond Moody and "to my

surprise, filled a whole Sheraton."

"What I remember about that," she said, "is that I had purchased a very striking painting in Washington a few weeks before. It was a picture of a laughing Jesus, portrayed in a way I had never seen him portrayed before, and I had it in my hotel room. When Ruth Stapleton came up to my room and saw it, she said 'Wow!' I told her 'Do you like that? It's yours.'

"Later, I found out, she became involved with (Hustler publisher) Larry Flynt, around the time he announced that he had experienced a religious conversion. Larry Flynt also admired the picture of Jesus, and so she gave it to him. The next time I saw it, it was on the cover of Parade magazine."

"A lot of this, though, is learning to look within yourself," McKnight said. "This is all about spirituality, about finding out who you are. And when you get into things like spiritual healing, I don't believe that you're necessarily going against the idea of God and Christianity. I think it's all compatible.

"After all, Jesus said, 'Greater things will you do than I have done.' I believe that. I also believe that the Bible originally made references to reincarnation."

Linda Scoville claims McKnight's class "has put me in closer touch with the universal power source — God, or whatever you want to call it. I don't think all these different ideas have to conflict with one another."

On the last class of the first semester, author Melissa Jager of Waynesboro told the class to "fiddle with reality. What you see isn't always what's there — take, for example, the idea that the sun 'rises' and 'sets.' It looks that way, but of course it does nothing of the kind."

And during a break, Linda Scoville said, "This is the one night of the week when I feel normal."